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Hybrid plan approved for secondary education at Chippewa schools

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CLINTON TOWNSHIP/MACOMB TOWNSHIP — Upper grade levels within Chippewa Valley Schools are set to make a hybrid return to the classroom.

At the Oct. 19 district Board of Education meeting, in a 4-3 vote, a return-to-school plan for grades sixth through 12th was approved. Those voting in favor of a partial return to in-person learning were Vice President Denise Aquino, Treasurer Jill DeMuyneck Zech, and Trustees Andy Patzert and George Sobah. Board President Frank Bednard, Trustee Beth Pyden and Secretary Laura Cardamone voted no.

The motion was to approve returning students in those grades to school for in-person instruction in a hybrid model, with a target return date of Nov. 9, the start of the second quarter.

Bednard said over the weekend, his brother and nephew contracted COVID-19.

“My 26-year-old nephew is in the hospital with decreased oxygen levels last time I checked,” he said. “Putting these kids together, it’s not going to be in their best interest. I’m afraid we’re going to become a major outbreak being the fifth largest school district in the state.”

Prior to voting, Aquino said it is a very difficult decision.

“Part of my decision is based on data. At this point, we’re on the rise,” she said. “On that portion, I would vote no. I also consider trying to represent the community. In that area, I would vote yes. The timing for me is a concern. They’ll have six days of instruction in November and eight days in December.”

District Executive Director for Secondary Education Paul Sibley said the secondary return will look very similar to the elementary return.

There will be two groups of students who will alternate days in the classroom.

At middle schools, Sibley estimates between 300-550 students in the building on a given day, a reduction of between 600-1,300 in a typical school year.

He said class sizes will be reduced, to below 20 students.

Earlier this month, the board elected for grades kindergarten through fifth to be in a hybrid model, while Early Childhood Special Education students and kindergarten through 12th grade Creative Learning Program students will be in-person five days a week. Those students returned Oct. 12.

Marina Licari, the district's executive director for elementary education, reported on how the first week back went.

"Everything went very well. Of course there have been some adjustments along the way, but our students and staff have proved to be resilient," she said. "It's been a transition to have half of the number of students in the school building that you normally would have."

The district admitted that the number of "F" grades at the high school level nearing the end of the first quarter this year, in the remote setting, is about twice as many as last year, and over five times as many at the middle school level.

Pyden said that from a safety standpoint, "our standard seems to be that the standard for illness is death. It's a false narrative to say it's 'working' in other districts, because it's not."

COVID-19 data was also reviewed at the meeting.

Citing the Macomb County Health Department, Superintendent Ron Roberts said COVID-19 cases per million on Aug. 13, when the district decided to not begin the year in a hybrid setting, was 128. He said that number decreased to 42 by Sept. 18. By Oct. 1, cases were at 81 per million.

Another data point was that in school-aged children by community, from Sept. 28 to Oct. 12, four coronavirus cases were reported in Clinton Township, and 16 cases reported in Macomb Township.